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The Legacy of Vietnam

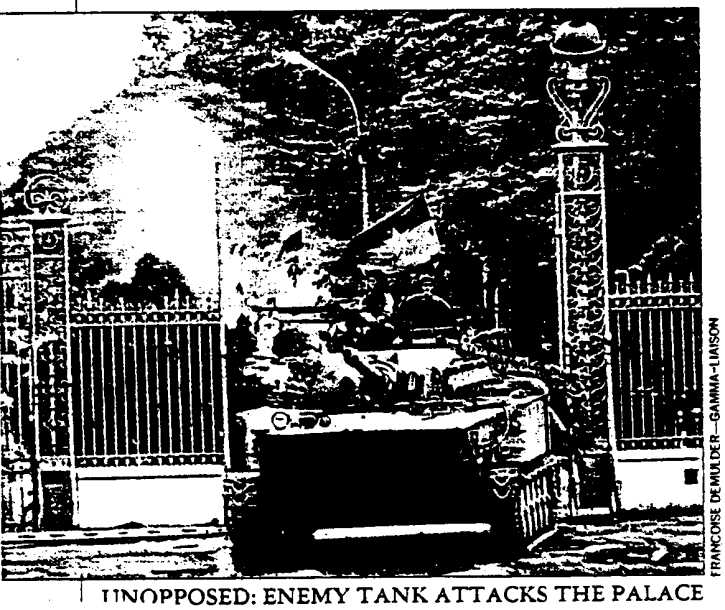
55 Days Of Shame

After 58,000 men had died, after billions of dollars had been squandered, America's crusade in Vietnam dwindled down to the rooftop rescue of a few Marines with a mob of abandoned allies howling at their heels.

It was just after 6 o'clock on the morning of April 30, 1975, and only 11 Marines were left on the roof of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. The door to the rooftop helipad was locked and barricaded, but on the other side Vietnamese pounded away at it, springing the hinges and cracking open the door. Clouds of tear gas billowed from the top of the six-floor embassy, and gunfire rattled randomly in the streets below. *They are not coming back for us,* thought Sgt. Steve Schuller. *We really are stuck here.* The man in charge, Maj. James Kean, never doubted that a helicopter would come back for his desperate dozen. But the Marines on the roof had no radio, and for nearly two hours there was no sign of another chopper.

Kean remembers telling his men to lie down so that they wouldn't be seen from below. Schuller recalls that he set up a machine-gun emplacement facing the door. "We knew eventually they were going to break it down," he says now. "So we half-assed a gallant last stand." Someone passed around a bottle of Johnny Walker Black. Just before 8 a.m., they watched as riot police escorted the country's latest and last president, Duong Van (Big) Minh, down Thong Nhut Street to the Presidential Palace. Then the Marines spotted their helicopter, a CH-46. They signaled to it with smoke grenades—"everything we had," says Schuller, "green, yellow, red." The pilot made a couple of passes, dodging small-arms fire from the ground, and finally settled onto the pad.

By now the door to the roof was six inches off its hinges. Kean ordered his men to throw tear-gas grenades into the stairwell. The ploy bought precious time, but the copter's whirling blades sucked up the gas, momentarily blinding the Marines and their rescuers. Kean and his men scrambled aboard, and the CH-46 lifted off. First there was a dizzying plunge; then the chopper clawed for altitude and fluttered off toward the U.S. fleet waiting in the South China Sea. Aboard the helicopter, the Marines found a PRC-25 radio. Its buzzer went off, and a laconic



FRANCOISE DE MULDER—GAMMA-LIAISON

UNOPPOSED: ENEMY TANK ATTACKS THE PALACE

years of bitter divisiveness at home, America's crusade in Vietnam dwindled down to the rooftop rescue of a few Marines, with a mob of abandoned allies howling at their heels.

Americans of the age will never forget the televised pictures of their countrymen dodging potshots from abandoned allies as they scrambled out of Vietnam. The French had left Saigon in 1954 after a flag-lowering ceremony on a parade ground; in 1975 the Americans sneaked outside after dark to lower the embassy flag for the last time. How could the enormous U.S. enterprise in Vietnam simply collapse like a house of cards? Why couldn't Washington at least negotiate a dignified withdrawal? Such questions are still alive in the minds of survivors. Merritt Stark, for years a public-health adviser in Vietnam, lost his 26-year-old daughter, Laurie, in the crash of a planeload of orphans in the final days. He is still searching for "a number of answers" about Vietnam. "If we got the answers," he says, "this would be a lot more commemorative to [those] who died than putting up some statue or memorial in Washington."

The art of deflecting blame reached new heights after the fall of Saigon. In an early book, Frank Snepp, a former CIA analyst in Vietnam, blamed his station chief and his ambassador for neglecting to organize an orderly U.S. withdrawal while there was still time. The ambassador, Graham Martin, still blames Washington for cutting short the helicopter evacuation—and thus for leaving hundreds of Vietnamese friends in the dust. And Martin joins Henry Kissinger and others from the Ford administration who blame Congress for a fatal cutoff of U.S. military aid before the final offensive. Richard Nixon is another forceful spokesman for the blame-Congress school. "When we signed the Paris peace agreements in 1973, we had won the war," Nixon maintains in a combative new book. "We then proceeded to lose the peace."

You have my assurance that we will respond with full force should the settlement be violated by North Vietnam.

Richard Nixon
in a letter to President Thieu, January 1973

There is plenty of blame to go around. In their nation's most critical hour, Saigon's President Nguyen Van Thieu waffled, his opposition plotted another coup and key generals fled from the battlefield ahead of their troops. It is odd that few of the Wash-